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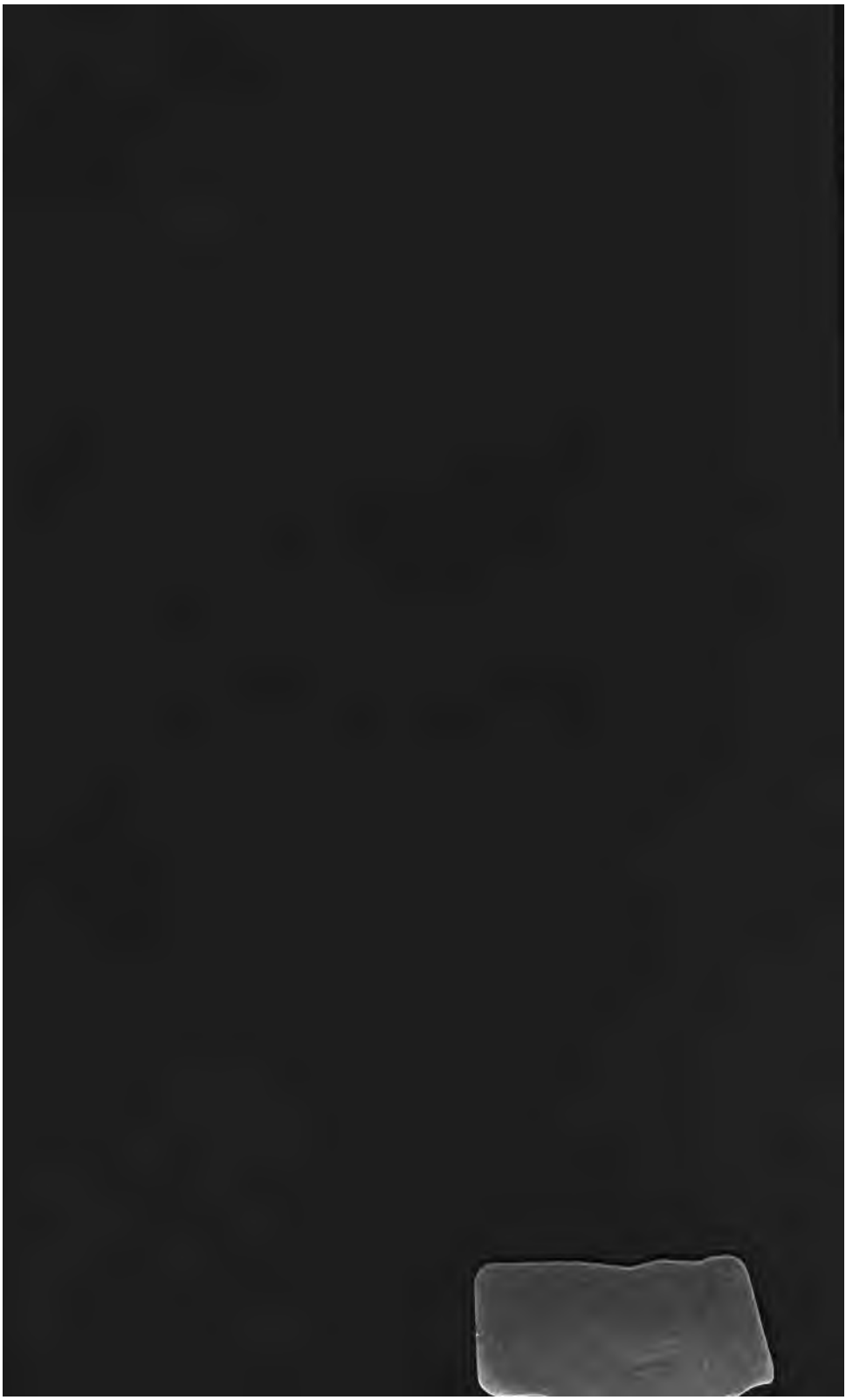
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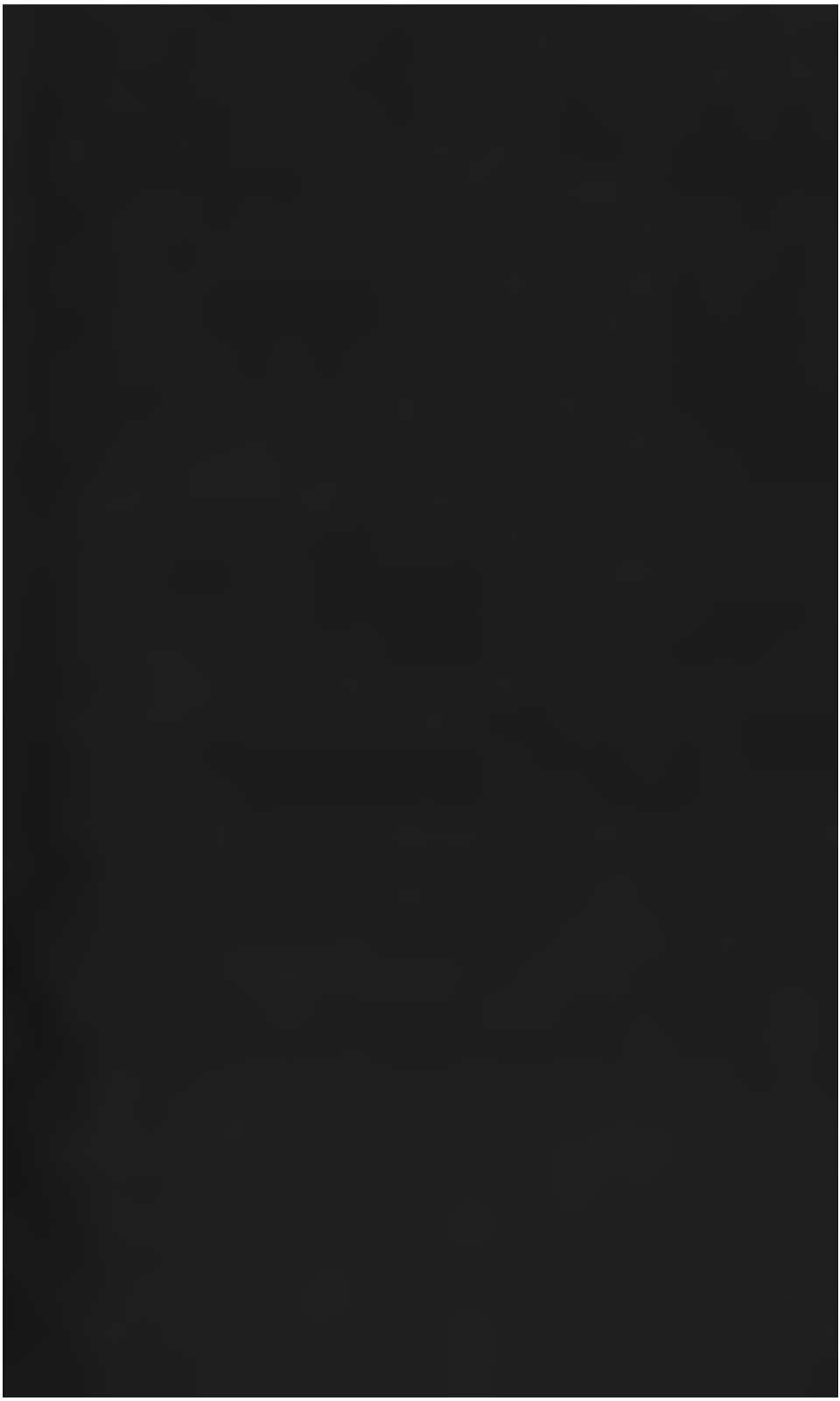
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LETTERS
ON
CONNOISSEURSHIP.





LETTERS

ON

CONNOISSEURSHIP.

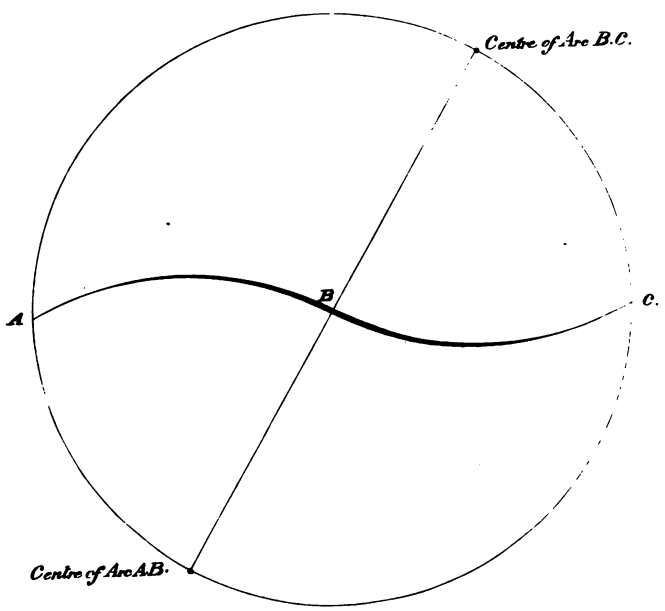


LETTERS

ON

CONNOISSEURSHIP.





Line of Beauty.

LETTERS

ON

CONNOISSEURSHIP,

OR

THE ANATOMY OF A PICTURE.

WITH SOME

Remarks on National Galleries, and the Mission of the Modern Artist.

BY

WILLIAM NOY WILKINS.

LONDON:
CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.
1857.

170. c. 75.

LETTERS

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PREFACE.

DURING the summer of last year I was induced to undertake the following Letters on the properties and requirements of a high Work of Art, at the suggestion of an eminent mathematician and friend, for whose guidance only, they were originally intended. But as Art is now becoming a part of general education, and is still but imperfectly understood, notwithstanding all that has been said and written about it, and since its patronage has extended from the aristocracy to those of humbler resources, I have willingly listened to the encouraging advice of friends, and have given these Letters to the public.

I do this the more confidently, as I find it is very generally considered that Art-criticism is without definite principles; for while all do not hesitate to give

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picture to be able to trust to their own judgment in the selection of a painting, with perfect satisfaction to themselves and to others as to the result.

With this end in view I have divided my subject into three portions. The first relates to the spirit of a picture, those qualities which are absolutely essential to every high Work of Art; the second treats of the means by which this idea, or nature, is embodied; and the last enters into an account of the several substances used in the manipulation of the work, with a view to its durability under the effects of time or local agents.

I have likewise considered the several methods of lighting galleries and hanging works of art; and made some concluding remarks on National Galleries, the mission of the modern Artist, his social status in different countries, and some of the chief difficulties that beset the path of the painter in England.

What I have said of the artist is alone applicable to the mission of the poet, of whom Turner was a noble example, as distinguished from the host of professional drawing-masters and draughtsmen in oil and water-colour who form the increasing army of Art.

Very useful and excellent are many of these latter minds; chiefly copyists, of great readiness and mechanical execution, but devoid of invention, expres-

sion, or of aim beyond the present. Fame has little to do with them, and in truth they seem to care little for her in return; indeed their number alone stamps their merit! No! genius is not so common, though her counterfeit, tact with talent, is; and the "Department of Science and Art" may congratulate itself if in twenty years' time it creates one poet-painter or original designer, even though at the cost of those true ones of Nature's making which its unjust competition will have destroyed.

Without ideality or invention there can be no true painter, designer, or original mind; to whom Nature is all in all. To that source then, and not to Art, all must go who would seek to understand the poet or his subject, and by that standard will the true mind and the true picture be proved.

With this end in view I shall conclude; and if in publishing these Letters I shall in any way succeed in removing from the mind of the general public many mistaken notions regarding Art and Artists, which the interests of trade have fostered, I shall not consider my task vain. In this little work, however, I make no attempt at style or fine writing: I wrote as I felt, studying brevity rather than quantity; though in truth the silent labours of the palette are ever more favour-

able to thought than speech, and with a few exceptions neither the artist nor the mathematician are remarkable for that enviable command of words which marks the literature of the day, and in which the historian and the novelist so eminently excel.

August, 1857.

LETTERS

ON

CONNOISSEURSHIP.

LETTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

DEAR READER,

Before entering upon my subject, I wish to offer a few words on the necessity which has compelled me to leave the easel for the desk, thus to address you. When I hear and read of hundreds and thousands of pounds given to dealers and professional connoisseurs for works not worth (except as curiosities) the panel on which they are painted, and know of artists who have lived, and others who are living, in neglect, while the dealer who purchased their works, and the copyist, have amassed a fortune;—when the early and often best works of an artist are passed by with contempt until he has died or grown too old to enjoy the rewards which a fortunate whim in the

public taste has given to his recent productions;—when I find the name, and not the picture, still only looked to, and see a host of meretricious libels on truth and nature held up as models of Art, and bought at high prices,—when I feel all this wrong and commercial corruption fostered and increased by those who ought to be the poet-painter's best friend, and see the multitude of ambitious clerks and mechanical draughtsmen salaried and set up as *masters*, in fine buildings, well stocked with all the means and appliances of *borrowed* art, to compete with the original productions of the poet-painter, and bar the avenues to the little support or patronage (as it is called) that remains, I cannot longer be silent; I ought not, while I can speak at all, and only regret that I have not the eloquence of a Thackeray, to speak of these wrongs and abuses as strongly as I feel them.*

But, great as they are, they are not without remedy, if you but lend your influence in removing them, which I trust a perusal of these pages will induce you to do.

Art is but a language; a picture but a poem or a book created to embody those ideas which words can but imperfectly express. A right estimate of the nature and value of this language, then, is not the only good I seek to gain in thus addressing you; I hope

* See Note A., page 107.

also to take the first step towards suppressing the traffic in Art to the injury of the true artist, who, pursuing his art in the retirement of Nature, and for her own sake, has not the opportunity (had he the desire) to compete with those who make a trade of his calling, to your injury as well as his own.

With these brief, yet somewhat introductory remarks,

I remain, dear Reader,

Yours, in all sincerity,

WILLIAM NOY WILKINS.

LETTER II.

THE IDEA.

It is the fashion for most people, and for the dilettanti in particular, to regard Art or a picture as an article of *virtù*, wholly apart from Nature or the object represented. They are for ever sinking the subject of the poem in their consideration of the metre—the intellectual in the technical; so that the faults of the artist, and the mechanical blemishes of the work (whether arising from the vehicles used or the lapse of time), come to be regarded as inseparable peculiarities in the works of the painter, both ancient and modern.

When a picture, then, is presented to such minds, the idea that it excites is not that which the artist laboured to give, but is one of property and manipulation; until the object of all Art, and the true spirit of the picture, is lost in the consideration of its texture, its pedigree, and the artist's name.

Hence have arisen those mistaken notions of the

value of a Work of Art, that have led to that dependence upon the dealer and commercial connoisseur, which it is the object of these letters to remove.

But to my subject. It is the proper province of Art to express and perpetuate the beautiful in Nature, and by means of lines and colours, to convey the *idea* of reality, whether that be an event of history or a sunset of yesterday.

Now to accomplish this end by *Art*, is the work of an artist, who has thus to give, by mechanical process, the effect that Nature produces on his own mind; and so it is with painting as with the drama, the actor fails to do his part to Nature, if he reminds us of himself.

That it is no easy task to develope this idea or spirit of Nature, is evident from the scarcity of eminent painters, and the very imperfect nature of the materials employed. Yet it can be produced in many ways, from the simplest outline to the most elaborate painting; that is, the idea of reality or the *thought* can be either translated, as in a drawing, or reproduced imitatively, as in a painting.

Well, then, this leading feature or life of the object represented should predominate in every high Work of Art. The mind of the spectator should not be required to supply anything; it should go at once to the idea or spirit in the work.

When therefore a Work of Art excites or interests the spectator to the extent that the object in Nature would do, it must be good, whether it be a sketch or a finished picture. Thus, the outlines of Raphael speak to us as strongly as the finished works for which they were designed; only in the latter we have the additional sources of gratification in light, shade, and colour, by which they are rendered a fuller reflex of Nature.

All pictures, then, that have this idea of reality, are worthy of note; their value, compared with a finished work, and their durability, are then the only points you have to consider when forming a criticism upon them.

LETTER III.

DETAIL.

I HAVE now glanced at the first requisite in a high Work of Art, namely, that it should give the idea of Nature or the object represented. But it is not every work which does this that is worth the painter's toil or the buyer's money, inasmuch as there is in Nature much that is commonplace, as the grass and stones we tread upon, for instance, which it would be a waste of time to pick out for delineation, except as accessories to more important subjects.

For it is the object of the poet-painter to give as little commonplace as possible, as well as the greatest amount of enjoyment and instruction with the fewest possible touches; and to take care that the Nature that he does present to us is excellent (the most beautiful if he can), and is *that rendering* which the subject best admits of.

For we may have a vulgar rendering of Nature, as the Dutch have given us, as well as a poetical, Turner-

esque, or eminently beautiful one; while at the same time a vulgar subject may be treated in the highest style of Art. Thus the 'Gin Lane' of Hogarth is perfect, but who would compare it with the 'Transfiguration' of Raphael? Nevertheless there are not wanting many who would prefer the drunken boors of Brauwer to the works of Raphael, Michael Angelo, and Turner, in whom the *ideality* of Art may be said to have culminated.

Thus a good picture and a first-class Work of Art are not the same. The vulgar and the ignorant will ever look to the drapery, the touch, and the texture, and finding those to their satisfaction, will buy and pronounce the work good. But the man of taste and education, of judgment and of genius, will seek for the motive or poem of the work, and its beauty, either of form or colour; wanting which, he will call it bad, and the painter a mechanician, but not a poet.

It is true however that the faithful delineation of a scene in Nature will, apart from any story or accessories, often move us strongly, for the language of Nature is the highest of all poems. But it is rarely in the commonplace that she speaks, and hence we say that the delineation of a common subject is not worthy of the artist's labour, except for study or as a diagram.

True also, for some time past, the desire for novelty among Art-admirers has called out the mechanical

powers of the painter on common subjects, in what has been termed "Pre-Raphaelism;" but this has arisen as much from the reaction caused by previous carelessness in execution and abuse of generalizing, as well as from the tendency of people to be taken with what they are most familiar with. Academies and artists moreover value such Art chiefly as examples and as practice; but the Venetian school of colour, and expression, still keeps its ascendency, as it is also that art which the painter produces for himself in his studies, or when he keeps the poem of his work in view.

That this is true in Nature may be seen during a storm at sea. It is impossible for the eye to take in the details of any one wave or mass of foam as they rush past; we see only spray, the drifting vessel as a mass of dark amid the grey gloom of the scudding clouds overhead, with here and there a sea-gull as a speck of white; all of which can be expressed in Art without the finish of a Dutch interior, if that were either possible or desirable to delineate.

When, then, any work is presented to your mind, the first point to be looked to is the sentiment or idea; then the manner in which that idea has been carried out; which last is rather a matter of comparative excellence in relation to a perfect resemblance of Nature, than a test of merit as a picture or story on canvas.

Thus also, the execution should be in keeping with the subject—detailed or highly finished where such would be in Nature—broad and generalized where indefinite in the original nature; though many artists, knowing that the public are caught by detail, work with that view, that their labours may be sold to the admirers of a bit of drapery, although often bad as a poem or a reflex of Nature. But the true connoisseur (which I wish you to be) will always detect the fault when keeping in mind the leading feature of the work, the thought in the picture, that which is the life of the whole.

LETTER IV.

CONCENTRATION AND UNITY.

In amplification of my last Letter, I must now speak of two of the principles necessary in a work of Art—Concentration and Unity.

Now a picture being a representation of a single event, it is necessary that a work should either represent a moving point of interest (in which case the picture becomes a panorama), or else a stationary one, or a single picture, which the spectator is supposed to see without turning the head. Thus, if a procession be chosen, the artist usually takes the foremost or most striking portion of it for delineation, leaving the rest, not as he knows it to be, or would see it if he looked that way, but as it would appear to him when directing his attention to the point of interest in the work, which also ought always to be the point of sight.

You will always know this point in a picture by your attention going at once to the leading feature; for if the work produce distraction, this point must be

wanting, and where this is the case there can be no repose, no story.

Concentration is not alone necessary to the work as a whole, it must also extend to every part of it; each portion of the work should have one part more strongly expressed than the rest. Every shadow should have a deepest shade, every light a point of brilliancy, or flatness and insipidity will be the result.

There is a very excellent illustration of these essential qualities in a Work of Art—concentration and unity—in the 'Marriage Contract,' by Jan Steen (in the possession of the Lord Chancellor of Ireland). In this work there are five groups of figures, including the principal one. Each group has its own centre of interest, yet all bearing upon the subject of the picture in the principal group. This is Nature.

Another instance of this unity may be seen in the 'Chase Interrupted,' by Murillo, from the gallery of Sir Charles Coote, Bart. Nothing can be lower than the subject of this picture—an old woman making an entomological study of her child's head,—yet such is the intensity of the *spirit* of the picture and the absence of all visible means by which it has been worked out, that the attention is at once riveted to a subject which in any other hands would only excite disgust.

This work is a perfect illustration of the power of the idea in the picture, in overcoming the effect of a

flat surface and of paint; illustrating also the subject of the preceding Letters.

In the latter work, the genius of the painter has made the spectator the cause of the interruption, in such a manner as to make one feel quite ashamed of the intrusion. That is Art concealed by Nature.

Unity also requires that no one part should contradict or interfere with another in the work. The whole must be of a general tone, red or yellow, as the case may be, light or dark; for, with all her variety, Nature is ever uniform.

How different is the treatment of bad pictures, where one part is at variance with the other, and scattered in interest and colour; and of how little use is the mechanical execution which is usually wasted on such productions!

It is this rallying-point, this unity, that renders studies from Nature, or works painted on the spot, so valuable; for this predominant sentiment in Nature compels the artist, however wandering, to keep to the point of interest in the work before him.

You may have often heard of such studies, and cannot now be surprised at the value which artists set upon them. Of course a work painted from a study by the *same artist* should be as true as the sketch, whose excellence often wants the mechanical completeness of the finished copy.

When I come to speak of expression, you will see a further value in studies, and why they have so much unity. You will learn also that you cannot have the qualities of story, predominant idea, keeping, and unity, without expression, or this latter without all the others; and also why it is that a flower, nay a single leaf, from Nature, will arrest the attention of the observer of Nature, when a varied and pretentious composition without these qualities will fail to interest.

LETTER V.

PICTORIAL ARRANGEMENT.

As affecting the unity as well as the idea in a picture, and as one of the intellectual requisites in a perfect Work of Art, I shall devote this letter to the consideration of the "*forte*" points, or points of principal interest in a work.

The proper placement of these in a picture may always be known by its looking unformal; for where the effect is otherwise, you will surely find one or more of the several objects in the work to be at equal distances from the two sides, or parallel to some other object in the picture.

Variety of position is what the artist aims at, but as he has to contend with the rectangular lines forming the boundary or frame of his picture, that condition is found to require the several objects to be placed in an arithmetical proportion to the top and sides of the work.

So that if a prominent tree or building be repre-

sented, it should be placed in some such proportion as two-fifths from the top and three-fifths from the sides, with smaller or larger objects in like proportion.

This proportional placement of objects is absolutely essential in a landscape work; and I may here observe that few complied with this rule like Turner and Stanfield, all of whose works abound in points of interest in every possible variety of position, but so placed that no one part interferes with the rest, the effect of which is, to make one totally unconscious of the frame or boundary when looking at the picture.

The old masters are very deficient in this placement of the several objects in their finished works, and to this is to be attributed a great part of their ugliness or unpicturesqueness; while the English school, since Turner's day, is remarkable for the reverse.

The old masters appear to have painted without reference to the frame, and either generalized or typified Nature, as in the Venetian school of Titian, or copied everything, bad and good, as in the Dutch school of Teniers and Brauwer.

The object of the former was the expression of the beautiful, while the latter confined themselves to the representation of the commonplace in Nature, as one would see it in the camera.

Yet a few strokes of the brush from the scientific

painter will give the expression of a storm or a calm, which the mechanical artist would fail to accomplish.

Each school however has its merits; and objects of everyday life, such as fruit-pieces, interiors, etc., are best treated in detail; but in all, the rule of proportion must be observed, or the effect of the work will be marred by repetitions, however excellent the execution may be.

It is true some modern artists, particularly Turner, have executed works in violation of these rules, apparently to show their powers; but the disadvantage of not having attended to pictorial requisition will, in spite of other excellencies, be evident to all who know where the rule has been departed from.

I am of course speaking of the requirements of a *perfect* Work of Art, which, as I have before observed, should ever *reflect Nature, in spite of coarse handling, paint, frame, or local position among surrounding objects,* as I shall further show in my next Letter, which will finish the purely intellectual properties of a picture—those that lie open to the comprehension of all who can perceive the excellence or reality of Nature.

LETTER VI.

EXPRESSION.

I WILL now speak of the crowning quality of a Work of Art, without which all other excellence is vain—Expression. This is the very life of painting; it is the characteristic or leading feature in everything. Thus, a figure without expression is a mere anatomy —lifeless.

We say of a work without this quality, that it is spiritless, soulless. It may interest the mechanic, but not the poet, or the lover of Nature; for it can never touch the heart. It, and it alone, demands genius, and accordingly it is rare.

Now such is the power of expression in a Work of Art, that a picture may be wholly out of drawing, be contrary to the laws of perspective, be destitute of colour, nay even of light and shade; and yet, with this quality, it will affect the mind as strongly, and often more powerfully than Nature.

In illustration of this paradox, I will refer you to the

designs of Hogarth, to our own inimitable 'Punch,' and the many humorous illustrations of the day; where, among designs perfect in every requirement of Art, you will find others purposely exaggerated, yet speaking their own irresistible fun more powerfully than the most faultless drawing.

It is expression that is the chief charm of sketches from Nature. The expression of Nature is the result of copying her. It is her spirit that is infused into the pencil of the painter when studying from her, and hence the excellence observable in the works of all who have studied in her Academy.

For we cannot have Nature without this quality; for there is not a tree, cloud, or leaf but has its own peculiar expression, which an artist need only give to render himself understood; although, as I have said before, to make his work a *complete reflex* or imitation of Nature, he must resort to colour and form.

How often do we meet with faces that are faultless in outline and colour, that are beautiful according to the laws of beauty, but which are wholly devoid of the power to interest. Such are unexpressive faces. And as it is not the province of Art to perpetuate dulness, we pass such subjects by, or else beautify them by expression, as Sir Joshua Reynolds has done many a wealthy clod.

So then, wherever there is life in a work or story, there must be expression.

You will find excellent examples of this essential quality in Flaxman's outlines of the 'Iliad' and 'Odyssey,' in the 'Hamlet' and 'Faust' of Moritz Retzsch, and in the humorous publications of the day.

The sister art of music affords us ample illustration of the value and nature of expression. Every one knows the difference between a piece played on the violin or sung by a gifted musician, and the same executed with the mechanical precision of a hand-organ, where expression cannot be called forth.

It is the sheet-anchor of the orator and of the poet, as well as of the painter; and though it is often simulated by Art, it is an inborn gift, and the one which ever attends genius, if it be not genius itself.

And I may here observe, that if every one looked more for this quality, and less to the technical, in the works of the day, we should have less draughtsmen and mechanical artists, and more poets.

The works of Hogarth, Flaxman, and Retzsch depend almost entirely on this quality of expression for their beauty and value, for mere form would fail to give the same ideas. Thus, many have been struck with the strong resemblance between the rotund face of a spectator and the oval features of an ancestor in a family gallery.

Hence, also, you may find a tree, an animal, and even a cloud, bring to mind a totally different form or object by mere expression alone.

Turner was remarkably excellent in this quality, (in what was he not?)—every touch of his told; though, from having been put on the canvas in a coarse, slovenly manner (favourably termed loading,)—time has injured the expression, and given us dirt instead.

This expression is seen when a heron is leaving the still pool; in a brace of hounds in the leash, eager for the chase; in the tall masts and rigging of a noble vessel, or in the solemn cedar, against a twilight sky; in a vessel in a gale, when every spar is bent to a curve, and the crested billows follow her like hounds; when the mind is roused to strong emotion, as well as in repose: but never in dulness; never when the movement is merely mechanical or involuntary, or when Nature is seen under commonplace effects.

The unseen spirit of Nature, or our own minds, must act on the object positively, in order to call forth this quality of expression, whether in painting, poetry, or music.

I know of no beauty equal to that of expression. Beauty of form, beauty of colour, of light and shade, and surface beauty, may be all present, yet leave us unmoved; throw in expression, and we shall hardly miss the rest.

Look well, then, to this essential virtue in a Work of Art; for by its presence you will be able to dis-

tinguish a poem on canvas from a sign-board or diagram of tints, which every work without expression may well be called. And always bear in mind, that it cannot be given to a work without genius, though genius may not always be able to impart it; just as the sun cannot always gild the earth with his rays, *or Truth find an open ear to receive her.*

The qualities that I have enumerated in these five Letters are applicable to every kind of Art, and may be, though they rarely are, exhibited as strongly in a simple drawing or sketch as in the finished painting. They demand the highest powers of invention or genius in the painter, and are almost wholly independent of the mechanical requisites in the subsequent stages of a work.

I have therefore placed them among the intellectual properties of a picture, as the Algebra of Art.

I must now quit the mental portion of a picture for as much of the practical as is necessary for the proper understanding of the commercial value of a work, merely observing, that, all other things being equal, the well-executed picture is to be preferred to that which is not; though no amount of mechanical execution, wanting this spirit, should be preferred to that which has all the qualities I have already enumerated.

PART II.

LETTER VII.

COLOUR.

One of the most difficult tasks an artist has to accomplish is a representation, on a flat surface, of objects in such a manner that the eye will not rest upon, but will, as it were, look through the canvas.

In a translation of Nature, or drawing, whether in oil or tempera, this deception of the eye is of little moment, and is rarely or never attempted; all that is sought is, to give the *idea* of the object represented; while in a painting we must not only instruct the mind, but deceive the eye also.

Now to do this, it is necessary, first, that the colours should be such as one would see in Nature under the same effects of light and shade and climate, and also that they should be put upon the canvas in such a manner (particularly in small works, which require to be viewed near the eye) that no particle of paint

shall be visible at the proper distance from the picture; for if by unskilful handling or unnatural colouring we are reminded of the means by which the painter has produced his effect, the eye is no longer deceived, and the work passes from a painting to a highly finished or pretentious drawing. Unfortunately we have a very notable instance of this fact in the Turners in the Vernon Gallery. These pictures, loaded with colour and varnish, have become so incrusted with dirt, which, it appears, it is impossible to remove, that all deception is out of the question.

The great landscape-painter has indeed left us an example of the evils of coarse handling and the necessity of painting smoothly, not only as one means of concealing the flat surface or picture-plane, but for the better preservation of the work. Time moreover has acted on the lead with which these works were painted, and has destroyed this deceptive charm to a still greater extent, many of them being now little more than wrecks of pictures, having only their story and expression, and that marvellous truth of form and effect for which Turner was so pre-eminent.

Well, then, the colours in the work must be natural, and carefully put on the canvas; and here it is difficult for me to enumerate the several tints required, without going into the elementary principles of colour, which would be contrary to the plan I have laid

down in these Letters, as well as to the assertion that all are qualified to judge of a work of Art who can see and relish Nature.

Thus, if you do not see white grass in Nature, it should not be white in a picture; and if you have noticed the golden colour on verdure and all objects under a glowing sunset in Nature, you should not find fault with the same colour in a picture of a sunset, notwithstanding that you know grass to be green as you see it under an everyday ordinary aspect.

But if you cannot see Nature, if you are like many —unable to distinguish red from green, you certainly cannot judge of the merits of a work representing the colouring of Nature, and must, if you will have a picture, of course purchase on the judgment of others.

There are few however who are not familiar with some Nature, enough at least to enable them to check the absurdities of the uneducated amateur or charlatan in art, and who, with the help of these remarks, cannot well go astray in their estimation of the real value of a Work of Art.

With this digression, I shall briefly observe, that the colouring of Nature demands that every object should have its local or own peculiar colour, modified of course by the climate, season, hour of the day, the influence of light and shade, and the proximity or

reflection from surrounding colours, such as that produced on pieces of various-coloured cloth by a green glass shade, or the influence of the atmosphere on red or yellow, which you may have often observed at a distance of two or three miles, under a clear sky.

Thus, in judging of the colouring of a picture, particularly a landscape, you have only to recollect what Nature did on a similar occasion, or would do under the same influences; in other words, do as the painter does—go to Nature first, and then judge of Art.

With regard however to the value set upon warm over cold pictures, this is chiefly because warm colours excite the eye more than cool colours, which are just as natural, particularly in our northern climate, and as difficult to paint truly.

With these few hints, I must again refer you to Nature for natural colouring; and if you can see colour there, you will find no difficulty in recognizing it in a faithful Work of Art, or discovering its absence in a bad one.

LETTER VIII.

STYLE.

THE means by which an artist can produce his effects are so limited and imperfect that it would be an idle task to hope to rival Nature were it not that she seldom, if ever, can be seen under the various circumstances of form, colour, light and shade, and arrangement, that Art admits of. Many modern painters, aware of this, give up all hope of reproducing Nature, and confine themselves to translation,—some leaning to form, others touch; while others again adopt some peculiar mode and tone of colour, or light and shade, by which they become known and usually valued; for people are apt to get accustomed to any peculiarity which they think is unavoidable, particularly if they are partial to the personal disposition of the painter, or if he be the fashion.

Thus it is very common to hear people talk of the style of such and such an artist; to find them preferring one style, as it is called, to another, thereby

acknowledging that they look upon pictures as pieces of furniture or articles of *virtù*.

Now, strictly speaking, there is but one style; which is that which best imitates Nature.

It is true that no two painters are alike in their works; but while those of Cuyp, Claude, and Turner are perfectly distinguishable, this difference does not arise from the style of each, but rather from the local colour and treatment caused by their predilection for certain effects in Nature by which they are known. To talk therefore, or look for style, as such, in a work, is to go back a century, when Art was in its infancy in England; for Gainsborough and Wilson, and even Sir Joshua Reynolds, who had styles, would be thought unfinished and mannered now; Turner, too, is hardly free from the charge of paint.

Manner of some kind or other we must always have, but there can be but one "style,"—that by which Nature is best represented; where neither the mechanical peculiarities of fresco nor oil are visible—although we should adopt the excellencies of both;—where the clear individuality of Nature alone shines through, in spite of canvas, paint, frame, and—that fruitful source of styles—the artist's own expression.

The handling (wherein style is usually shown) in a high Work of Art should be concealed. To ac-

complish this, however, it is not necessary that the surface of the work should resemble a teaboard; but one thing is certain: it should never appear in raised lumps; for if any portion of the picture should be so handled as to cast a shadow or receive dirt, although we may not perceive it at first, or when the work is fresh, a few years, sometimes months, will be sufficient to destroy the charm of the illusion, as well as the value of the picture as a Work of Art. Gainsborough and Constable, and many of Turner's works, are warning examples to all collectors, of the evils of coarse handling; while the works of Murillo, Van Eyck, and the Dutch school, afford the finest illustration of pure painting and faultless execution.

The works of Sir David Wilkie, Stanfield, the elder Danby, Cope, Hunt, and Millais, and others of the modern school, also exhibit the value of smooth painting; while it is certainly more difficult of execution than the slapdash manner of Hilton and Gainsborough. At the same time "loading" gives great freedom to the imagination of the painter; and this probably was the reason why it was adopted by men who in their conceptions were far above the mechanical unimaginative Dutch.

I trust I have now made myself clear to you on these requisites of a work, colour and handling or style.

Of course the compass of a letter is hardly sufficient for a detailed analysis.

But as I am not writing for artists or the artistic amateur in Art, but for those who have not hitherto made Art or pictures their study, and whose various avocations preclude their forming any other opinion on matters of Art than those current among partial critics and interested commercial dealers, what I have said or have to say will, I trust, be sufficient; at least with the help of the various works on Art already extant.

You will also keep in mind that I am necessarily restricted in these Letters, in my endeavours to speak only of the known principles which govern a high Work of Art; for I must of course reject whatever admits of a doubt, or would demand artistic knowledge or aptitude in my readers.

When artists write for artists they sometimes trust to the intuitive perception of the readers. Hence Ruskin's works, which may sometimes puzzle a logician, are yet perfectly intelligible to the artist, to whom expressive writing is of more value than a mathematical demonstration in matters of Art or pictorial beauty.

I may however observe, that mathematical sequence is not always to be found in Nature, whose laws are nevertheless fixed. Thus we cannot always demon-

strate the precise height to which a given wave will rise; but we can determine the height beyond which it cannot go. And so with Art: it may not be always easy to prove the existence of beauty or truth; but we can always tell where they are not. The negative proof is certainly that which is best suited to matters of taste and beauty.

Yet I trust you will find from these observations that Art and Art-criticism have definite principles, and that matters of taste and beauty have their laws in Nature as fixed as those of natural science.

LETTER IX.

FORM.

I SHALL offer some few observations on Form, in this Letter.

As I have before remarked, it is necessary that a high Work of Art should exhibit only the most beautiful in Nature. We do not desire to perpetuate the ugly or the commonplace; it is therefore the task of the artist to select the finest forms, the richest and purest colours, and the most striking and beautiful effects of Light and Shade, which he can find in Nature.

An ugly picture, then, ought to be burned; and the low vulgarities of the Flemish and Dutch schools should be, and I believe are, valued only for their matchless manipulation and truth. They are admirable illustrations of the fact that a work may exhibit the best art and yet not be a work of high art; such as the cartoons of Raphael or the compositions of Leonardo da Vinci, where form is enthroned.

Now the forms which are acknowledged by common consent and the criticism of ages, to be the most beautiful, are those found in a perfect human figure, and the ocean-wave.

Reduced to its simplest elements, I have found this form in the opposite arcs of two equal circles continued in one line; the arcs being formed from either end of any line with a radius of one-sixth of the circumscribing circle. This line so formed I regard as the true line of beauty;* it runs through the whole of Nature, and will always be found in every object of a beautiful character, speaking of course with reference to beauty of form only,—hence its name.

You will therefore do well to note the frequency of this line in a picture; and be assured that where it is not to be found naturally, the ugly (or lumpy) will predominate.

Of course I do not mean this line of beauty should be in every object; there must be some contrast, as in Nature. But it should ever predominate in a picture, as it ever does in a beautiful object in Nature, which, as I have before observed, ought alone to be the subject of the painter's toil or the poet's theme.

Nature however is so prolific in beauty, that we have only to copy her (generally speaking) in order to please or instruct; and on this account you will

* See the Frontispiece.

always find studies and works painted on the spot to possess this beauty of form, which, with the aid of the expression of Nature that such works always have, will leave little to be desired by the most fastidious connoisseur.

All animals in their natural state that are remarkable or intended for swiftness, trees swayed by the wind, ships built for speed, and the ocean-wave, are characterized by this line of beauty; and those are precisely the objects which delight us most.

But in Art I need go no further for illustration of the beauty of this line than Flaxman's outlines and the works of Canova.

Form is the sheet-anchor of the sculptor; and in the renowned marbles of Greece we see this form, this beauty, carried to a degree of perfection that has never been and can never be surpassed.

I must not however be understood to imply that all works that have not this line of beauty, or beauty of form, must necessarily be worthless: they may be, and usually are, beautiful in colour, or in light and shade; but if the form be ugly, they cannot be perfect, and it is of the requirements of a *perfect* Work of Art that I am speaking.

The landscapes of some of the old masters are, from their deficiency in this particular, execrable; particularly those of Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, and

Correggio. Indeed it would seem as though they painted the landscape background of their sacred subjects as lumpy, stiff, and unnatural as possible, by way of contrast; for certainly the trees and the forms in the neighbourhood of vinegar-works or a London churchyard would furnish finer lines than those in their pictures, whose landscape part may be regarded as the *beau idéal* of the unnatural and the ugly. And I do believe that it was this neglect of Nature in the backgrounds and landscapes of the old masters that produced in a great measure that indifference to, and contempt for, landscape Art, which characterized the public taste till recently; and even still a lingering impression remains, that landscape Art is inferior to that of figure, forgetful that none but a Turner could give the idea of space and distance, or paint truthfully those impossibilities to the amateur, *light* and *air*.

The trees and mountains of many of the old masters seem to topple over the heads of the figures; and certainly no one who ever looked upon a cloud could mistake Raphael's lumps of painted dough for misty vapour; and were it not for the form and expression in the figure, their works would not have ranked above a sign-board, as the "Oxford Graduate" has so ably shown. They took care however to paint the figure from Nature, or their works could not have survived the age in which they were executed: so true

is the remark of Johnson, that "Nothing can please many, or please long, but correct representations of general Nature."

Had the old masters been as excellent and as true to Nature in their backgrounds and landscape representations as they are in figure, they would have left nothing more to be accomplished: for in material and method of execution they undoubtedly surpass the most of the modern schools, who are reluctantly compelled to pursue Art more as a matter of commerce and immediate pleasure than of fame.

The lighting of a picture, technically termed "Chiaroscuro," will form the subject of my next Letter.

LETTER X.

CHIAROSCURO.

I COME now to one of the richest resources of the Painter — "Chiaroscuro." Light and Shade is the nearest translation of this term in Art.

By the mere lighting of a picture we can excite the mind to joy or depress it in gloom. And while Form is best adapted to the representation of the beautiful, Chiaroscuro best expresses the sublime or the terrible.

You may see its power over the most commonplace object or scene, under the effect of twilight or in a thunder-storm: and so well are its effects known, that from the days of Rembrandt to those of its greatest master, Turner, it has been the favourite resource of painters when delineating commonplace, as well as in the treatment of a lofty and terrible character, to which it is best suited. It is in truth the drapery of the sublime, and, like history, it throws into the shade all mean and superfluous details, or absorbs them in its principal light.

This, in fact, is its object, and what it does in Nature.

Thus, if you look down upon a level plain in common daylight, you will see Nature before you like a plan. But let a storm arise, or the grey canopy of cloud be broken through by the sun, and the whole scene, so flat before, becomes then animated and interesting; changing from a diagram to a picture; throwing out new forms and lines, and thereby producing variety and that massing and repose which constitute the meaning of the term pictorial.

Thus we can have no *picture* without light and shade being thrown over the local light and shadow of the several objects; both must be massed, and each must have a point brightest and darkest in the work.

It is by Chiaroscuro that the engraver competes with colour; while he can translate Nature or a painting so perfectly, that, with the exception of fruit and flowers, colour is hardly missed.

You will find abundant examples of its truth and powers in the numerous engravings from the works of Turner and Stanfield; for though Rembrandt has the reputation of being its greatest master, his simplicity and force are so often repeated that he becomes monotonous compared with Turner and Stanfield, whose deepest shadows are full of light.

Well then, breadth of effect, either of light or shade, is the characteristic and essential requirement of all works that aspire to the term pictorial; in other words, you cannot have pictorial effect with equal light or dark, or where the light and shade cuts the work into halves, examples of which latter Chiaroscuro you will find in every auction-room devoted to the very profitable sale of "ancient masters."

But without entering into a dissertation on Light and Shade, which would only be applicable to the artist (who has ample instruction on that point in the numerous elementary works of John Burnet and others), I will merely refer you to the works of Turner and that school, where Chiaroscuro is treated according to the principles of Nature, and to Nature herself, from whom those artists derived their powers.

For though the works of the genuine old masters and early modern school of Sir Joshua Reynolds and Gainsborough abound in vigorous Chiaroscuro, yet this power was too often purchased at the expense of truth (*which I hold the poet and the painter should ever adhere to, or their mission is vain and their occupation contemptible*), most of the works alluded to having light and shadows cast for the sake of effect, which could not occur in Nature, by which "license" they have lost their value as examples of true Chiaroscuro; while by similar departures from the great model in

colour, they have helped to produce, if they did not actually bring about, that indifference to Art among the people, that has led to the popular idea that Art is an article of *virtù*, and only for the wealthy and the noble, who require its stimulus, whether that be obtained according to Nature or not.

But a very little observation of the effects of sunlight on a landscape, which you may find in a morning or evening walk, will suffice to render these remarks on light and shade ampler than the compass of a letter allows; you will then also be able to prove the faults of otherwise good pictures; and once you get the habit (which is the object of these Letters to induce) of testing the merits of a work by reference to Nature, or your own recollection of her aspect under *similar* circumstances, you will then be in the position of a true connoisseur, and may rest assured that when you have made the choice of a work, you need never be ashamed of the dictum of the interestedly adverse or ignorant critic, or of hanging the work on your walls; for though the picture may be coarse in its execution, like those of many of the works of Turner, Constable, and Hilton, still if it speaks the language of Nature ever so little, it is worth a host of those that, with all their vaunted splendour and boasted pedigree, their brilliant lights and solemn shade (usually of varnish), are after all but painted lies.

Certainly no modern artist would be tolerated now who would set up for exhibition or sale works so unnatural and imperfect as many of the much-prized "ancient masters."

Artists feel this; but it is in vain for them to speak: prejudice, "classical association," and the interested clamour of the dealer, who makes more by the dead than he does by the living painter, as well as the very natural dislike of those who have invested their thousands on works,—many of which originally cost little more than the value of the colours upon them,—to admit their ignorance, silences their remonstrance; and it was not until the "Oxford Graduate" brought his eloquence to bear upon the error, that this respect for "varnished tales" and "juicy" pictures was at all shaken.

Time now, let us hope, will do the rest.

PART III.

LETTER XI.

PIGMENTS.

HAVING now spoken of the principal characteristics and requirements of a high Work of Art as a poem or transcript of Nature, I shall devote this and the following Letter to the consideration of those substances which enter into the composition of a picture and affect its durability.

Certainly the ignorance or indifference on this point among the public, and even with many of our best artists, is surprising, particularly when it is borne in mind that with other commodities people are usually enlightened enough.

No one would buy a quantity of plate without testing or knowing something of the intrinsic value of the material employed in its manufacture. But because a picture appeals to the eye it is deemed sufficient if that organ be satisfied; and so, without a

thought or care whether the effect will last three months or a century, large sums are handed over to the dealer (rarely to the painter) for works which, with all their beauty, are often no better than scene-paintings. Surely if a painter takes months or years to complete a work capable of delighting or instructing, it is of the first importance that it should, with ordinary care, be as fresh and bright after fifty years as when it leaves the easel.

We renew the paint in our houses, but we cannot repaint our pictures; and yet almost all of the works of the day, and indeed most of the modern school, have been executed in materials almost as fugitive as those we put on our dwellings.

I have said, the public knows nothing of these things; while the artist, too often compelled to paint for money and for the middleman or dealer, pays—can pay—little or no attention to the chemical nature of the substances he employs. All he does is to take care (as a late "successful" artist told me he did) that his works "*should last three years;*" by which time the "work is expected to pass into other hands." Now to all who cannot manage to realize a competency in a few years, as this meretricious artist did,—to all who desire to follow Art for its own sake, or not at all, and who would strive to make fame the precursor of money, —such practice is a kind of artistic suicide.

For, as in some cases I have recently learned, where the deterioration of the works has become visible after the absence of a year, that painter's pictures are no longer bought, while the general tone of value of apparently similar works is lowered; the proprietors of such paintings at once making up their minds, that, as the pictures were by one of the most eminent of the day, all Art must be equally fugitive, and only to be enjoyed during the Exhibition.

This conclusion (more popular than logical) is very hard on those who have done and could act otherwise, and a sure means of keeping alive the once fashionable rage for "old masters," because most of the genuine productions of the early schools have stood. And it is because of this latter fact, that artists who are not driven by circumstances, maintain the possibility of painting durably, and do carry out the old method of painting or manipulation into practice.

Now, though it is true you cannot always prove the truth of this by testing the colours on a picture, you can, by purchasing the work directly from the artist, or requiring his signature as to its *bonâ fide* quality, satisfy yourself of the material quality of the picture, and learn the nature of the substances employed in its execution.

This course of action would soon have its result. The true artist would be encouraged to paint for

Time; the dealer would no longer be able or find it his interest to impose a fugitive work on the public, or absorb the money which should go to the artist; while the colour-man, finding it no longer to *his* interest to manufacture bright but fugitive materials, would pay more attention to such pigments as are known to be lasting than is now required of him to do; and Art would rise to her ancient dignity, and not be as she is now,—sunk to the level of a commodity.

If it were possible to find the pigments red and yellow of the brightness and quality of the ultramarine, a picture could be painted with *ease* to rival Nature, and be as durable as the lapis-lazuli from which the latter colour is taken; but with all her boast, Chemistry has only multiplied the vices of manipulation, leaving the virtues as they were before. The artist therefore has to select from among the mass of vegetable and mineral pigments which modern chemistry has given him, those that come nearest to the properties of the ultramarine, using the earths and ochres, and only such mineral colours as experience and the common tests of fire and lime will warrant.

Now, as those substances come nearest to Nature in their effects on the canvas, and cost little (with the exception of ultramarine), there can be no reason for their partial rejection but the fact that it requires more skill and labour to get out the same effect with them

than it does with the ordinary preparation of lead in use, by which almost every local colour in Nature can be imitated *without mixture.*

That the old masters used the permanent earths, and these substances exclusively, may be learned from their frescoes (paintings with water, on walls prepared with lime), which resemble their oil paintings still in existence, as well as from the negative evidence that chemistry was not then (they have reason to be thankful) in the advanced stage that it is at present; and also from the fact of four or five colours being sufficient to produce their results. Such pigments correspond to the earths and minerals in use at the present time; and with a white earth or a mineral like the oxide of zinc, an artist with skill and a thorough knowledge of the principles of colour, can paint as truly to Nature and as durably as those works that have stood the action of centuries.

Now you may always detect whether or not a work has been painted with these substances, by submitting a portion of the picture to the action of the hydrosulphate of potash for instance, to detect lead, which it will do by changing the part tested immediately black (unless where very thickly varnished). This test in fact produces in a few seconds the effects of years upon all preparations of lead; it applies equally to works by modern artists, copies of "old masters," as

to old masters themselves, which, estimated according to the principles laid down in the preceding Letters, added to the history that every good Work of Art ought to possess, will be to you a sufficient guarantee against mistaken value or imposition with any works presented to your notice.

I shall conclude this Letter with a brief detail of the principal substances, permanent and deleterious, which enter into the composition of the majority of modern Works of Art, affecting their durability and consequent value.

The first of these is "permanent white," a finer preparation of the common white paint of commerce. This being the representative of light in Nature, enters into every colour more or less in a picture; the canvas ground of the picture also is usually of this substance.

Now lead has the property of absorbing carbon and hydrogen from the atmosphere and oil in the painting, so that this preparation from the acetate of lead has the tendency to return to its metallic base. Hence one chief source of the after-darkening of all works prepared with it.

Lead also turns dark when excluded from the light, which retards this darkening; so that a picture so painted will not admit of being shut up.

You may have often noticed the dark patch on a

wall painted with lead, on which a picture or other object has been placed for some weeks; this is owing to the same cause.

All works, then, painted with lead or its preparations must be fugitive, unless when kept under thick and strong varnish (also objectionable, as I will hereafter show) or in strong light and air perfectly free from carbon or hydrogen, restrictions which obviously exclude such works from our cities and apartments.

But supposing the picture to be under the most favourable conditions as regards lead, if it contain a particle of vegetable and animal pigments, such as the lakes, gamboge, indigo, or Indian yellow, common daylight alone will be sufficient to alter it in a few years.

Now there are few, if any, of the works that have been painted for the last century that do not contain some or all of these substances; and we have a very notable illustration of the result in the works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, which are now little more than tinted drawings of what they once were. It is to this cause also, that we owe those dark productions, usually copies, falsely called "old masters," which now find purchasers only in obscure provincial towns, and by which true Art has been brought into disrepute. The old masters did not paint with lead, and the genuine specimens, which are not numerous, are all remarkable for their brightness and the beauty of their colouring.

Works, then, painted with lead or its preparations, vegetable colours, Prussian blue, and those from copper, can only be valued as scene-paintings; and any excellence they may possess can, *unless under rare and peculiarly favourable circumstances*, only be of temporary duration, no matter by whom executed.

We can always however prove the truth of these assertions by looking over any old collection of water-colour drawings, those of Turner and Girtin for instance, and compare them with several productions by recent artists, or in juxtaposition with fresh washes of a few of the tints. I myself have seen many of those drawings, and it was this change in their appearance that induced me to pay particular attention to the nature of the substances employed in painting, which led to my study of earthy and durable mineral pigments, and the preparation of them by myself, when I could not conveniently obtain them from those colourmen of known character in London from whom they may be always had.*

The great difficulty however is in their management; hence they are rarely employed alone for commercial purposes, or when it is required to get a brilliant picture in the shortest time and with the least trouble. For the earths and ochres do not look so bright at first as the lead and other fugitive pigments;

* See Note B., page 107.

but time mellows and brightens *them*, while it darkens the others every year.

Only just compare the Turner in the National Gallery with the Claudes on either side, or with the Cuyps adjacent, and note the purity and brightness of the latter, compared with which, the Turner looks dirty; the sky of the work having changed from the golden tone it once had, to the colour of yolk of egg, like a chromate of lead, as it is.

It would be easy to multiply examples of the uselessness (not to say worse) of painting with fugitive or semifugitive colours. I trust I have said enough to lead you to pay some attention to the private character and intelligence of such artists as you may have to deal with, when you are purchasing or forming an estimate of the value of a Work of Art.

There are some good works extant on this subject, though they rather lean too much to the side of the fugitive colours. The fact is, there can be very little profit made out of the permanent list; and then they are so difficult to manage, and the public is so careless and uninformed in everything relating to the Fine Arts, that it is hardly the interest of the colourman or the artist (except for his own use) to pay much attention to the subject; besides, attention to these things is not the way to make money, though it is the way to make fame.

Certainly, as an artist, I ought to rejoice at all this; for the more Turners that fade, the better! But I hold that Art should be followed for her own sake or not at all, and truly he that would make poetic Art a trade or profession, or means of making money, can be no true painter or poet; and will find ere long that he has mistaken his calling, and should at once enter an attorney's office or a shop.

These remarks upon the durability of Art refer chiefly to oil-painting, and are mostly applicable to landscape subjects, where colour and aerial distance are all in all. In water-colour the deleterious preparation of the paper with chlorine (used as a bleaching agent, and never wholly washed out) acts as an additional source of deterioration with such works; while the conversion of the vegetable mucilage mixed with water-colours into an acid, by the action of the air, renders water-colours, even when painted with the permanent list, mechanically fugitive, that is, they return to their original powdered condition. Hence the prejudice against them among our best painters and Academicians of the day.

In thus speaking of the several substances affecting Works of Art, I must not omit to mention the vehicle with which most oil-paintings are executed.

This will form the subject of the next Letter.

LETTER XII.

VEHICLE.

It is very common to hear oil-painting spoken of as an object of *virtù* in itself, as distinct from fresco or its weaker rival, water-colour; when in fact there is no difference between them in a high Work of Art: only the materials, or rather vehicles, used are different.

As I have before observed, the object of the painter being to produce a true and poetical representation of Nature, whatever means will lead to that result is that which is best to follow.

Now, as Nature never exhibits either the flimsy washy patchings of an ordinary water-colour, or the greasy, glaring, and dark aspect of the ordinary conventional oil-painting, but rather the appearance of distemper or fresco, it follows that a work properly to resemble Nature should, if painted with oil, show no traces of the vehicle when finished, but should look more like a fresco seen under glass; or rather

look like neither oil nor water, but having the power and force of the one with the light and aerial aspect of the other.

The old master knew this; and when oil-painting was first adopted for its durability and freedom, the purest oil only was used, and that was so managed as to disappear from the surface of the picture when the work was completed. This is now recognized by many of the modern school, of which Turner and the works of Mdlle. Rosa Bonheur offer illustrations. So that the public has come to regard this as a "new style," calling it "chalky," or any other name which interested calumny may think fit to bestow. This method however of painting with simple oil (poppy or nut) is not only that by which Nature can be best imitated, it is also the most durable. My own studies from Nature, painted in this manner, and with the simple earths and ochres, five years ago, are still bright and fresh; while those which I had painted with lead and the usual palette have visibly darkened, and will become still more so with time or gaseous agents. However, as with the durable pigments, so with simple oil, it is very difficult to execute a picture by its means alone. Hence most artists still use those "nostrums," as Burnet justly calls them—M'Guilps and Mediums—prepared with litharge (oxide of lead), to make their colours dry quicker; mistaking the

glitter of the fresh surface so produced for the freshness and brightness of Nature; and never looking to the effect of time on those substances, which always rise to the surface of the dry picture, producing those cracks and discolorations we see in such works, and which the public have come to regard with something of the same relish as they do the white flour they eat at their tables, which the miller knows to be doctored, and the physician to be poisonous. Be assured that every work that requires to be wetted with a towel, or varnished, in order to "bring it out," or render it visible, is not worth its frame. You may purchase it as a curiosity; but as an imitation of Nature—certainly not. *The good and the true work should look as though you were looking through an opening in the walls of your apartments; the whole picture should affect you as a piece of light, not as a patch of dark,* which is never found in Nature when an object is at all visible; for at such times the darkest night has light.

All who paint from Nature, or on the spot, know this, and hence the excellence of such studies; which, throwing into the shade the dark fireside productions usually set forward as oil-paintings, naturally raises a cry from the dealers, and manufacturers of such articles, of "chalk," and "over-brightness," as though paint could rival the sun! But if you look at Nature —that is, any object under natural light—you will

soon learn which "style" best resembles her luminousness even in her darkest moods, and how false are all those works that absorb the light like a mahogany table.

Such is ever the result of bad manipulation and the use of those M'Guilps and driers I have alluded to in this concluding Letter on the substances that affect the durability of a Work of Art.

LETTER XIII.

VARNISH.

In considering the vehicles used in a picture, I am naturally brought to treat of a very important element in a Work of Art in the eyes of most connoisseurs—namely, varnish.

Let a picture be bought at an auction, or even from the artist, and the first question asked is, "Has it been varnished?" If not, it is sure to be taken to some cleaner or picture-dealer, who, knowing the *penchant* for the glossy in the mind of the public or his patron, at once bathes the work in mastich or copal, to the complete satisfaction of the possessor, who considers that, now that the work has been "restored," he has made a bargain.

Now, do we not say of everything meretricious, "Oh, it has been 'varnished over'"? Do we not talk of a "varnished tale"? Well, a highly varnished picture is very little better, and a thing you should always be on your guard against; for if there be not

something wrong either in the handling or colours of the work, why put a glare over it so totally at variance with the aspect of Nature?

Many modern artists do not varnish at all; few, if any, of the old masters did;—certainly what we see on their works is of a date more recent than the picture.

I should like to see the picture of an old or new master that a dealer would leave unvarnished. No! varnish helps to sell too many a meretricious work not to be popular with both dealer and purchaser.

Now, although this glaze is put over a work to "bring it out," as it is technically termed, and preserve it, it is nevertheless, paradoxical as it may appear, a source of injury.

For it is the property of all varnishes, at least those that are used for the purpose, to darken with time, like lead, when kept from the light, and for mastich to chill, or become coated with moisture in damp weather; so that after a few years it is generally necessary to remove this varnish, in order to substitute a new coat.

Well, if this could be perfectly done without disturbing the delicate painting (which is always the last on the picture), the evil would be merely one of trouble and expense; but this is seldom the case, as was recently exemplified in the cleaning of Claudes in

the National Gallery. These works had been varnished, when first hung, by some of the Academy *employés*, with a substance called "*Academy varnish*," at that time in use, and believed to be good. This however being composed of substances that darken by time, the works thus varnished had become so dark that it was felt necessary to remove the glaze; but with what result, Messrs. Cunningham and Moore have been making the public somewhat familiar.

In the Vernon Gallery, also, there are two Turners (views in Venice), where, in the process of trying to remove the old varnish, the smoke of London has been rubbed into the picture, utterly destroying the aerial beauty of those works. Now, this injury could have been entirely prevented, had the pictures been painted smoothly, and with substances which are not affected by gaseous agents, when varnish might have been dispensed with. It is fortunate that we have the engravings to refer to, for what the paintings once were.

Artists however sometimes urge the necessity of varnish, to bring out the several re-paintings on the work, some of which may be more glossy or distinct than the rest, to the one uniform glare; but there are many ways of "bringing out" the work far better than by varnish, and more like Nature, which is neither glossy nor greasy, but resembles distemper.

It is not my purpose however to say here how this

may be done, or how I have done it myself; every artist has, or may have, his own method.

Nor is it necessary, in order to judge of the merits of a picture, that the public should be conversant with the manipulation of the painter, no more than it is necessary they should know how to print, or found type, in order to read or appreciate the literary merits of a book.

It is the mistaken notions on these points that have made Art-criticism so absurd and injurious to the artist and his Art; most connoisseurs considering that they have only to pick up here and there a few technical terms from elementary works and the studies of painters, in order to set themselves up at once in judgment on paintings, whose originals in Nature they would pass unnoticed.

No doubt a good hard, clear, and permanent varnish, thinly put on, would assist in the preservation of a picture from dirt, etc., but the varnishes in general use only retain dirt, and give an unnatural glare, by which Art is lowered in the estimation of the true connoisseur, however acceptable this varnish may be to the lovers of pictures as articles of furniture or *virtù*.

It is pitiable to look at the walls of most well-furnished houses, where copies and "old masters" are in estimation. They are covered with dark, glossy

patches, surrounded with frames, offensive to the lover of Nature, and unintelligible to the connoisseur, until the self-satisfied owner comes with his wetted cloth to "bring out" the feeble powers of the varnish, or descant on the merits of some "Claude" or "Cuyp," some pseudo-Teniers or Ostade, which the artist who is invited to study them may have in his earlier years (like very many Sir Davids I could name), executed himself,—how and where let "Cawdor" Street declare,—that hell of Art, where varnish finds its best supporters, courting the uninitiated passer-by with its meretricious glare, while it brings into disrepute a method of painting unrivalled for its freedom and power of imitating Nature.

In this meretriciousness however it is greatly assisted by the frame, of which I shall speak in my next Letter.

PART IV.

LETTER XIV.

FRAMES.

A CELEBRATED modern historian has quaintly remarked, that if all the most eminent of the emperors and senators of Rome were stripped of their purple insignia of office, few would be able to assert their pre-eminence over the rest of mankind; so apt are we all to regard "the outward habit for the inward man." And so with pictures,—with most the frame is everything. Thus the picture-dealer puts his beggar on horseback. The collector runs off to the frame-maker for his most elaborate piece of workmanship, while the amateur, and even the young artist too, hastens to put his first-born into this pictorial throne, expecting to see his "historical essay" or bit of commonplace at once look every inch a king. With these the frame is all in all.

Well, this is a very expensive error; and certainly

that painting or that man requiring a garb not naturally a part of it or his composition, in order to attract attention, is not worth much, and is sure to be left neglected and despised when time has worn off the artificial casement.

As we say, "Good wine needs no bush," so we may remark that a good picture needs no frame; that is, to heighten its beauty or render it intelligible. We may, and do, adopt a frame to confine the eye to the work alone, that by surrounding it with one colour we may not be distracted by other objects adjacent. And as the objects in a good picture should recede from the surface, or appear to do so, the value of a frame is in proportion as it assists this contrast and retirement.

Keeping this in mind, then, you should always choose that frame for your picture (if the artist has not done that for you already) which sends the work furthest back, while it does not distract the eye from the principal object—the painting.

Now although every subject might advantageously be framed with colours that would harmonize and contrast with those in the picture; such as a tone of red for green pictures, orange for blue, or brown for grey; still it has been found that gold-colour answers the several requirements of a frame better than any other, and hence gold has come to be that in general use.

Gold moreover is warm in tone. If, then, the picture be of a golden tone, it will assume an appearance of splendour from being surrounded by the warm colour of the frame, whilst the greys and blues will derive a brightness from contrast. Gold also keeps clear and bright longer than any other tone of yellow, and by the ideas of richness and wealth it excites in the mind, it best harmonizes with works on which a high value is set; not to speak of the principal reasons, resulting from this splendour of gold, for its suitability to the decoration of a room.

But it is necessary to be on your guard against running into the very common abuse of this excellence of gold in a frame, namely, profuseness of ornamentation and highly burnished lights, the effect of which, except with very powerfully coloured pictures, is to distract the eye from the principal point of sight in the work, particularly if the latter has been painted in a frame of the simple "Lawrence" pattern.

Purchasers and connoisseurs should always bear in mind that the interests of trade are generally opposed to poetic art, and that the frame-maker will naturally (unless he have the honest deference of men like Joseph Green) advise a frame more costly and elaborate than is either necessary or good for the picture.

I have thus seen many truthful works weakened by this over-gilding of the frame, and pictures—water-

colours too—which did not cost five pounds originally, put into frames worth twelve and sixteen pounds.

In short, once this furniture-notion of Art and frames gets into the heads of connoisseurs, it seldom stops until all idea of the thing framed is lost, and the walls of their reception-rooms become ornamented with these specimens of the gilder's art, set off by the pictures they were originally designed to exhibit.

I would have you always let the artist select or advise the frame for his own work; or if you order a picture, you had best also state what frame you would wish to have it in (possibly to match others); this might enable the artist to paint accordingly.

But in general, the simpler the frame is, the better consistent with relief.

I may here observe that for water-colours and oil-sketches a white mount within a simple gold bead frame, with a gold edge next the picture, is very effective and harmonious, as white and black give value to or set off all colours, while the gold acts as contrast. Avoid however the meretriciousness of "Cawdor" Street, where, as with varnish, the frame is everything, and is indeed the most honest and valuable part of the picture, as you may see when walking down that great emporium of *Art*, not *Nature*.

That region of frames set off by pictures, so well described by Dickens in 'Household Words' under

the above *nom de guerre*, is, unfortunately for Art and the artist, though highly profitable to the copyist, not confined to that locality alone. Every provincial town now has its mart, its auction; and the rejected of London, of Paris, and Rome, are seen pompously arrayed in burnished gold in Liverpool and Dublin, where gentlemen who have been educated in our universities and travelled—men who ought to know better—eagerly attend, in the hope of picking up a Correggio, a Titian, a Murillo, or a Turner, for sums varying from ten shillings to two pounds. These "old masters," when varnished or cleaned and framed, they fondly hope to find such a bargain.

How many of these bargains, these "long lost, forgotten treasures," these "pictures with a pedigree," have been and are being bequeathed to "National" Galleries *in esse* and *posse*, let the Directors of the National Gallery declare; let Messrs. Christie and Manson unfold; let risen artists tell who have made them; and let your own judgment determine, when you shall have learnt from these and other remarks, what Nature is—what Art should be.

LETTER XV.

LIGHTING GALLERIES.

I HAVE now to offer a few observations upon what I conceive to be the best mode of lighting galleries, and hanging Works of Art; for I suppose you entertain the very general idea that it is of little consequence how a work is lit or hung, so that it be seen. This however is an error, which is often very injurious to the merits of a picture representing a scene in Nature, as I shall illustrate. Moreover, if you think it necessary to have an apartment for your books and a conservatory for your flowers, surely a gallery for your Works of Art is not an unreasonable requisite to demand in a well-planned house. You do not expose either your books or your flowers to the dust or air of an ordinary room; then why your pictures, which require greater care? Besides, it is only in a gallery or room set apart for the purpose, that one can really enjoy painting. Every house, then, should have one room, if possible, reserved for paint-

ing and statuary, if you can afford the latter; and as the lighting of this room is the sole difficulty to be surmounted, I will consider how that may be done so as to illumine the works equally, and at the same time to be easy of construction.

The most common mode of lighting a picture-gallery is by a centre skylight, than which (unless the room be circular) nothing could be worse; for as light strikes in straight lines, the effect of this mode is to illumine the centre of the floor directly and the walls partially, leaving the upper portion in shade. Accordingly, in almost all our picture-galleries those works only are fully lighted that have the good fortune to be hung on the "line" or level of the eye.

Possibly this may have been the reason for the adoption of this method of lighting. But private galleries may wish to be more impartial; and if so, since we want the rays of light to fall directly and evenly on the walls of the apartment, we must either have the opening immediately above the walls, as in the Continental galleries, leaving the centre of the roof dark, or we must adopt the simpler plan of a longitudinal opening in the centre of the roof; for if the opening be at the side, as in the ordinary window of a house, the effect obviously will be to make that portion of the picture nearest the window lighter than the rest; so that if that part of the work be

dark, the artist's shade would be thrown into light, and *vice versâ*. This would destroy all effect in a picture.

The whole work then should be equally illumined; and to effect this we must either adopt the Continental plan (slightly uneven in its lighting), or, better, have the roof to spring at such an angle that the light coming through the arched or angular skylight in the roof shall illumine the top of the wall equally with the bottom.

Now a semicircular dome, divided into three equal portions, or the three sides of a regular hexagon, the centre of which alone is glazed, will be found to admit the light in such a manner that no part of the opposite walls will be more illumined than the rest.

Since light moves in straight and parallel lines, you can easily prove the value of this plan by the application of a pair of compasses; by which means also you will find that the Continental plan gives rather more rays to the top than the bottom of the walls. There are many other modifications of this mode; but I have taken the readiest and simplest of construction as applicable to a gallery. However, in common apartments this method of lighting is not always practicable; the next thing therefore to be done is to hang the top of the pictures opposite the light, a little out from the wall, and at such an angle that a sheet

of white paper placed flat upon the picture will be equally illumined, or so that the glare of the varnish or glass is no longer visible; and with side walls, to bring out, as with the top, the side of the picture furthest from the light.

These two modes of hanging will be found to remedy, as much as possible, the common defect of an ordinary apartment, as far as the principal light is concerned.

I shall reserve my next Letter for the hanging of the several works as pictures.

LETTER XVI.

HANGING WORKS.

It is a very common thing to see even valuable works in the houses of collectors stuck all over the walls of the apartments as though they were a part of the pattern of the paper, or else hung at such a height from the eye, that the several works become distorted or foreshortened; the horizontal line or height of the spectator's eye in the work being thus placed on a level and often below the bottom of the frame.

Now when an artist paints his picture, he does not so place his work on his easel.

Taking his frame for an artificial opening, he fixes his horizontal line on the canvas within it and on a level with his eye, and paints accordingly. When the work is finished therefore, he expects it to be hung on the walls of the exhibition-room with this line of the picture on a level with that of the spectator; and hence his grievance, when, from want of space, or pre-occupation by older men, his work is not hung on the

"line" as it is called, that line being the one for which all works are usually painted.

In ceiling-painting this line can be chosen at pleasure, but with all others it is the height of your own eye.

On that line or height, then, all works should be hung; and no more should be exhibited than can be seen at such a height.

This also would lead to selection, and the avoidance of that distraction which every one feels in looking at a number of pictures hung all over a wall.

But you will say, the Academies do not do this. Very true; but an exhibition-room is restricted for space, though it should not be so; and it is thought enough if the new picture be seen at all, the public being usually left—would that they were always left! —to pick out such works as they might select.

In some works, however, when the horizontal line is very near the top or the bottom of the picture, a wall may admit of two rows, which will not look out of proportion.

The next point to be considered, is the proper disposition or apposition of the several different works so as to produce harmony or contrast; such as placing a warm, red or yellow picture, beside a cool, green or purple one; or by grouping warm together, and cool by themselves.

The latter method has many advantages; but by the former arrangement the cool are sure to suffer by the apposition of the warm. However, anything like hap-hazard placement is very bad.

In general those who can arrange a bouquet harmoniously can best arrange a gallery as far as colour is concerned.

Of course the arrangement according to "styles" or periods is a matter of choice; but in all cases, with paintings, this latter should be subordinate to that of colour, which is always the distinguishing mark of Nature in a high Work of Art or painting.

LETTER XVII.

POINTS OF DISTANCE.

HAVING now hung your gallery so that all the works can be seen without having to strain the eye up or down, the next point to be considered is the proper distance to view them from.

Now this may seem a superfluous matter to entertain; no doubt you consider that you have a perfect liberty to look at a work at any distance that suits your sight or your convenience; but though we are at perfect liberty to do a great many wrong things, we must take the consequences if that liberty be not founded on right reason.

Certainly there is no mistake more injurious to Art, nor more common among those not artists or artistic amateurs, than that pictures may be looked at from the same distance as a printed page; near or far, according to the wish of the spectator.

Thus you may see people in an exhibition peering into the canvas of the largest works, as though the

paint and texture of the cloth were the picture; regarding from the same close view the smallest and the largest paintings.

It is in vain for the artist to remonstrate or try to bring the truant spectator back to the proper distance. His information is sure to be interpreted that "there must be some fault in the execution of the work when it will not bear close inspection;" so no doubt thought the critics who were told by an eminent painter "not to get too near his work, as paint was unwholesome."

Let me observe, then, that every work has its proper point of distance, which, to speak generally, varies from twice to four times its length, that being the distance at which a given object or scene in Nature can be seen at once through an opening of the size of the particular frame.

Thus, a board a foot square, at two feet from the eye, will hide as much of a given space beyond it, as a board of two feet at a distance of four feet, one of four at the distance of eight, or one of eight at the distance of sixteen, and so in proportion. Consequently the manipulation of the painter must be according to the size of the work; for touches and tints that would be distinct at two feet from the eye, would be confused at the distance of eight, and invisible at the distance of sixteen.

Hence the heavy and apparently slapdash execution

of the scene and gallery painter; which, viewed at the proper distance, may look as fine as a miniature.

And so far from the artist being unskilful, whose large works will not bear close inspection, it requires the highest skill and practice to accomplish the difficult task of rendering objects on the canvas so that they will look right and fine at the proper distance.

Many of the late John Martin's works were rendered ineffective by having been executed with the touch and detail of a cabinet work; so that when the eye went to the distance necessary to take in the whole, the detail was lost; the effect being that of confusion and labour. While the works of Rubens, Turner, Stanfield, and Roberts, invariably send the spectator back to his proper place of at least twice the length of the work.*

I trust I have now said enough to render a walk through a gallery more satisfactory to yourself and the artist than heretofore, and to convince you that it only demands a little concentration on the several works before you, to enable you to judge of the merits of a picture as a reflex of Nature or as a Work of Art.

And while you glance around and derive pleasure from the many scenes and episodes of life and Nature depicted on the walls; when your desire for variety has been appeased, your eye gratified, and your taste

* See Note C., page 108.

improved and awakened, think for awhile on the many gifted painters whose genius and adventure have brought so much story together for your enjoyment; think of the artist's struggles, and what is his mission in these days. But if you cannot determine what those are, as very likely you cannot, let me offer a few remarks on what that mission is; and I shall also state somewhat of the difficulties which beset his path in England, and which tend to lower his labours to the level of a toy, and the painter to a mechanic without a soul;—for the Muse is impressionable, and ever droops when the motive for action is low, or irrelevant to the subject of her song.

PART V.

LETTER XVIII.

NATIONAL GALLERIES.

It has occurred to me, that as Art Education is now becoming universal, and is moreover connected with National Galleries and public institutions, it is just as well that I should say a few words upon National Galleries before speaking of the Artist's mission, which is essentially educational..

I fear however that you may consider my notions on this subject very barbarous; but you must recollect that I am taking a popular view of Art and its object. Moreover I do not advocate the suppression of all Ancient Art; I only ask that it should not be always thrust forward to the exclusion of modern subjects, seeing that its ideas are not in harmony with our modern life and requirements. For instance, they are about forming "National Galleries" throughout the Provinces, and it has been suggested by the

influential friends of the dealer and the copyist at Head-Quarters, that it should be filled with "copies" of the old masters, that is to say, with the pictorial body of the old master, without his soul.

It is said that by this means Art will be encouraged; though it is quite forgotten what model the old master had to copy from.

Well, if the student in Art prefers to go to the ancient master for his inspiration, rather than to that Nature from which those masters derived their power and invention, he cannot have better models than the *genuine* Raphael or Correggio will furnish him. But to study and make a copy of a copy; to set up for imitation and inspiration the doubtful art of the copyists of Paris and Rome, is surely not the best way to encourage or develope the ideality of Art, to say nothing of the absurdity of calling such a collection "National."

I have always considered it a matter of surprise that Englishmen (who are always laughing at Irish bulls) should continue to retain their own in the designation of "National" to a collection of pictures notoriously the reverse. I do not forget the remark of a Frenchman who was asked how he liked our National Gallery. "I have not yet seen it," was the reply. "Why, we have just returned from it." "Oh, that in Trafalgar Square! Sir, that is not English,

that is the gallery of the nations of Europe." Just what it is; a collection, too, for the most part composed of the mythological absurdities of the Middle Ages.

Now, as a means of educating the artist, that and similar collections may, *if original*, answer very well; but if the public is to be instructed as well as amused, it should have something more in harmony with our modern ideas than Fauns and Satyrs and little fat Cupids with impossible wings, creations which would never command respect, were it not for the matchless expression and life-like reality of the *forms* that, strange to say, *animate* these mythical spirits.

The student in classical lore may like such subjects, possibly from the association of ideas derived from a University education centuries behind the wants and feelings of the day. But it is unreasonable to expect the majority of modern Christians to be so imbued with this love of Grecian mythology; very few can even understand the ancient masters, at least otherwise than as far as the several objects in their works resemble Nature,—the form and expression is alone appreciated, while the wings and other appendages are usually, it will be found, regarded by the mass of the public as the license or eccentricities of the painter's genius.

That this should be so is not to be wondered at;

since the wives and children of the artists usually furnished these models of the winged boys, Venuses, and Minervas; thus illustrating what I have already said, that the expression of Nature is omnipotent.

See how it speaks in the 'Three Graces' of Rubens, the majority of whose subjects, for the same reason, will ever please and instruct.

The 'Three Graces,' however, are all from Nature, though the idea of their grouping is a fiction.

Why, then, keep to this eternal classical rendering, since Nature only is seen?

Let us have some fresh ideas, such as may be to us what those of the Greeks and Romans were to the early nations who succeeded them.

But let me ask, have we no Graces, no saints and martyrs? Does the nineteenth century afford no deeds, no beauty of sufficient interest and excellence, that we must for ever draw upon mythology for impossible perfection?

Must we for ever behold humanity depicted on the walls of our national institutions, with tails, hoofs, and horns, and see lovely little children turned into monsters with eaglets' wings? Are we never to gaze upon the loveliness of woman's form otherwise than as seated on the back of a humanized bull? Can painters find no other protectors for their nymphs than Centaurs and Satyrs? Beauty, I fear, will ever

be under the influence of the golden shower; but need she for ever be married to a swan?

We want, in truth, some new thought on the walls of our public galleries; something like the Vernon Collection, that true National Gallery.

There should be at least one-half of our collections devoted to modern pictures, historical as well as landscape; works that would reflect the feelings and wants of the nineteenth century.

This would do more to raise Art to the dignity and value of the French schools than all the schools of design in Europe. It would save Art from the littleness of cabinet (so nearly allied to furniture) pictures, while it would be a source of real instruction and amusement to the people.

And last, though not least, the modern artist's mission, of which I have now to speak, would thus have an ample means for development.

These remarks however are only hints for those who have influence and power. But if they may be the means in any way of assisting the modern poet-artist to carry out his mission, I shall rest content, well knowing that, in this world, "he that soweth seldom reapeth."

PART VI.

LETTER XIX.

THE MISSION OF THE ARTIST.

I HAVE now to make a few remarks upon the mission of the modern artist, particularly the landscape painter. But what I have to say is almost solely in reference to his labours in England,—in a country purely commercial, where a thing is cultivated for what it will bring in money, or for the influence that is supposed to procure it.

In the Middle Ages, before the invention, or at least the dissemination of the advantages of printing, before the publication of records and daily events after the manner of our modern press, Art took the place of the Oracles of Greece and Rome, the manuscript and the printed page. Religion and War were the two mainsprings of human action; and when not in the field, or in preparation for it in the castle and the hall, men congregated in the churches and abbeys,

or withdrew themselves within the precincts of the cloister. Then were the palmy days of Art in its holiest sense. It was then the painter lived. His was the task to recall the events of the past, to celebrate the deeds of the present, and, by the embodiment of active life and Nature on the canvas or the plastered wall, to excite the multitude, the warrior, and the devotee, to acts of equal and greater renown. But chiefly was he occupied in depicting the saints and martyrs of the Church, and in writing that fittest language on its spacious walls. Here was a theme for his pencil. And so deeply did he feel his mission, that he rarely approached his canvas without invocation and prayer.

Can it be wondered, then, that he should have left to us monuments of genius so lasting, so excellent, as those upon the walls of the Vatican? or that minds should have arisen to whom fame was everything, and with whom the sole reward was the consciousness of having been the historians of virtue and self-denial—the ones who felt themselves called upon to celebrate their praise?

This high mission, however, was not for all.

Then, as now, there were numbers who, without feeling or truth, sought to gain the rewards that were due only to those who had approached their labours in true sincerity of heart. Minds there were who

could copy, imitate, and plagiarize, but who could not create aught but a body, without the soul of feeling and expression to animate it.

These had no mission, though they, looking solely to their own interests, failed not to obtain wealth, though they wanted honour.

That age however, though not its vices, is past. The printing-press, science, the numerous arts, and the complicated interests of our modern civilization, have greatly modified the holier mission of the painter, whose duty now, particularly in England, is rather to preserve the aspect of the present, and fix that Nature which is fast fleeing before the encroachments of cities and of steam.

The modern artist can no longer be animated with the ancient religious fervour,—I speak now of course with reference to figure; the motive is gone, by which it was developed.

The joys and terrors of an imaginary world, that which "eye hath not seen nor ear heard," can no longer enter into his heart to conceive. The silent page and the earnest thought it inspires, the eloquence of the preacher, and, greatest of all, the never-failing example of the truly great and good, are now our teachers and incentives to that course of action and truthfulness of mind by which alone we can hope to enjoy or merit the rewards of hereafter.

God's Nature however is before us; we can take that and hold her up as our standard of excellence.

By depicting the "lilies of the field" we may cultivate a respect for the beauty of simplicity, so rare to find in our cities and artificial life.

By carrying Nature into our apartments, we may be led out to her own harmonious abode; while the scenes and events portrayed will become as landmarks by which we and our children may be able to estimate the progress we have made, or check the downward tendency of a too artificial existence.

This then is the mission of the modern artist in England; to keep alive the feeling and love for Nature in our crowded cities, and to point out her beauties to the denizen of the loom, the artisan, the manufacturer, and the millionaire, whose several occupations preclude their living amidst her forests and mountains as of old; and to embody by form and colour those ideas and events which may be but imperfectly expressed in words.

That this mission is a great and sufficient one, let the sublime reference to Nature's laws and beauty abounding in Holy Writ, the page of Homer, and our own Shakespeare, bear witness. Though, surely, the genius of a Turner is better suited to the embodiment of Nature's life on canvas, than the printed page of a Shakespeare or a Homer; and when these

two ways are offered to us for the expression of an idea, the most obvious and the shortest is surely pictorial embodiment.

Do not let yourself be carried away, then, by the sneer of "furniture decoration." If any modern Art be such, it is not a reflex of Nature, and is therefore bad. And if the meretricious abounds on the walls of our rooms and Exhibitions, blame not the poet-painter—the true historian of Nature; nor think his mission vain because ignorance and trade, political expediency and diplomacy, have exalted the copyist, the draughtsman, and the mechanical artist, and given us Art, with its showy paint and frame, instead of speaking Nature.

Respect the poet, the man of refinement and truth; encourage those only who pursue Art for her own sake; you will then have Nature, then you will have truth, and then you will have recognized the painter's true vocation in these days and in this country of mechanism and wealth. And let me observe in conclusion, that nothing is more grateful to genius or more stimulating to its exertions, than to find its labours respected and its mission understood.

LETTER XX.

SOCIAL STATUS OF THE ARTIST.

HAVING thus given you some idea of the true mission of the Artist of the present day, let me say a few words respecting his social position, or status, as it is called, under the several Governments of France and Germany, as compared with England. The time is not very long ago, when literature, now so honoured, was thought but little of; when its professors were compelled to "creep about to find themselves dishonourable graves;" while music and the drama were considered frivolous arts, and actors and musicians denominated in Acts of Parliament "diverting vagabonds." The aggressive pursuits of law and war alone were thought worthy of honour, and they flourished accordingly.

Well, as literature and the author were considered then,—I speak of course with reference to the public,—Art and artists are now.

It is true, we hear of Sir Joshua, Sir David, and Sir

Charles, and meet in society men who certainly have nothing to complain of on the score of either honour or rewards; but these are exceptions, and it will be found that these honours and emoluments have proceeded as much, or more, from their *personal* and literary qualifications and wealth, than from any regard for Art or respect for the artist, as such, among those who delight to pay them honour. No! Art is not respected, though the money and influence which successful talent sometimes brings us, is; and there are few who would not now still consider his or her child unfortunate, who exclusively manifested an early and ardent genius for Art. At the same time, we have statues to the dead, and posthumous laudation, Art-temples, and the anomaly of every little daub or amateur copy being held up for the admiration of friends and acquaintances.

The fact must be, as a well-known writer has remarked, "people are unwilling to give their contemporaries credit for a gift which places themselves (necessarily, as they think,) in the position of inferiority;" and therefore, while they laud and lay honours and wealth at the feet of the dead, they fail not to despise and decry the living.

Hence the rising artist soon discovers that he has nothing to expect from the consideration of others for himself and his Art, and feels that he must remain in

the background if he fail to turn his talents at once to the *commercial* account by which alone he can command that influence and esteem which genius itself confers elsewhere in Europe.

Now, neither the painter nor his Art is so treated in France or Germany.

In France, every encouragement is given by Government to the artist as well as to his Art; not "with exclusive reference to manufacture," or any such like debasement of the province of genius, but to invention. And when the young aspirant to fame has produced his first-fruits, the same fostering influence aids its further development, sends the student abroad for study, and when he has returned, places his work in his native town, and decorates the painter with the honours of the brave.

In France the painter is an historian; in Germany he is a poet, and then he has a poet's reward, and this, too, with an income below that of an English butler in an ordinary household.

Yes! we honour our men too, but not until they have become rich, regardless *how* that wealth has been amassed; and then we continue our rewards for productions that in the younger days of the painter would have been passed by with contempt (*vide* Turner, whose loaded eccentricities realized thousands, while those of his earlier years hardly brought pounds).

But I feel it won't do to go on thus,—truth is not always to be told, nor will the favourite doctrine of expediency always allow of its enunciation. Nevertheless it is a fact, that in France and Germany, Spain and Italy, the poet, the painter, and the man of science take pre-eminence, not only among the educated, but among the million; while in England, where Art is in such request, the artist, to live at all, must either lower his Art to the level of a perishable commodity which may be anything asked for, or else, like Barry, pine in obscurity in the lonely garret, surrounded by the unsympathizing trader and the purse-proud *bourgeoisie*, who were wont to point with the pitying exclamation, "Poor fellow! he is an artist." Hence the gradual decline of the much sought-for poet-painter in England; the high and gifted die off, those of commoner mould paint to sell, and, once entered on that career, the status of wealth may be theirs, but that of fame and poetry is lost for ever.

LETTER XXI.

OBSTACLES.

I COME now to some of the obstacles which beset the path of the poet-painter in England. I am aware however that in concluding this series of Letters with the consideration of the artist's difficulties, you may be disposed to smile, and to think that they are shared by every other profession in the beginning of the student's career. But it is not so.

Art, truthful or poetic Art, is so exceptional, and its pursuit is so wholly at variance with the business of life or the poet's necessities, that the artist is shut out (most unjustly) from all participation in those emoluments and employments which go to fill up the time of those of the recognized professions of Law, Medicine, and Divinity; while the want of that status and the advantages which a University degree confers upon the professional man, or of that social one which the artist has in France and Germany, leaves him at the mercy of the picture-dealer or the caprice of the

public and of chance patronage; for though the admission of his works into the Royal Academy of London is an undoubted proof of his excellence as an artist, as distinguished from the mere drawing-master or the copyist, and ought to be a status in itself, still the *public* does not think so; and, until his turn comes for the distinctive appellation of R. A., he is therefore placed in the dilemma of making himself known by the excellence and sale of his works, which neither the dealer (except at first cost) nor the public will purchase until he has become known! Thus, if he have no private property, he must fall back upon private friends, like Barry, and Wilson, and the late Sir William Allan, or seek the more honourable alternative, starvation. This is a hard lot for genius, for that plant which all are crying out for and all trample on. But if he have a family, they cannot starve; he must therefore resort to teaching, relinquish fame, or take to the rapid, meretricious painting for dealers and auction-rooms, that by these means he may be better able to live somewhat as the "world" would call "respectably."

Thus, after fifteen or twenty years of this life, some lucky hit—more of subject than execution—some titled order (for the sheep will see that the ram leaps first), brings him at once into notice, and all is easy then.

But how often, by the time this notice comes, has

the artist ceased to be a poet, and degenerated into a mere trickster, mannered, artistically corrupt, ready at a moment's notice to paint anything for money! What has he to do with fame—the aspirations of the morning of his life? he tried that, and starved.

We now find his prolific pencil everywhere, his early productions telling the ravages of time on their cheap and fugitive pigments. The colourman greets him with a smile: the more pictures, the more colours; and so the evil grows.

But where is the poet? He could not travel on that road; too deeply imbued with the love of Nature, he could only follow Art by recalling her to his own mind and then to that of others.

But who was to look after his interests while he was studying beauty?—for Art is jealous, and will have all a poet's time and thought. Alas, no one! Some few, indeed, have found a judicious friend; such was Burke to Barry, Sir Walter Scott to the late Sir William Allan, and many others whom I could name, by whose care and assistance their Art was kept alive.

But too often has the poet-painter been a prey to those about him; until, like poor Wilson and too many others, he was ready to curse the day when he took up such a calling as Art.

In the palmy days of the Annuals, and when scene-painting was a remunerative pursuit in itself, and

worthy of the genius of Stanfield, Danby, and Roberts, the artist could work for fame—as they did—and live. But the sole resource left the young artist now, is through occasional private teaching. It takes up little time, brings in a certain income, and sometimes friends, who in after-life often become patrons. This last resource however is now being wholly monopolized (particularly in the provincial towns) by the very authority that should foster rather than crush the artist.

The Board of Trade, by the establishment of Schools of Art, where *all* branches are professed to be taught at the cost of a few pence each lesson, with the chance of receiving a mastership, aided by that status which a Government appointment gives in the eyes of the million, has not only put private academies out of all reasonable means of support, but has created hosts of draughtsmen and non-naturally qualified persons, who, backed by the Government salary and *prestige*, thus absorb that patronage which should fall to those who are naturally gifted (*or rather cursed*) with genius, and who, in their early struggles for Art, have borne the heat and brunt of the day.

For it is not only mechanics and the humble who attend these schools, but "ladies" and "gentlemen"—the sons and daughters of physicians and barristers living in our principal squares and terraces,—some to learn accomplishments cheaply, others to swell that

very competition which is thrown in the teeth of the rising artist by the very class who take every possible means to increase it.

Surely, if the Board of Trade will step out of its course to encourage the practice of Art among the people (who need other instruction), by the reward of a pound a week and a mastership, it should extend its patronage to the struggling painter. But no, "it does not want Nature's artists," though it does its best to grow them! Yet when the artist is driven to these schools by a combination of those circumstances to which I have already alluded, *he* is met with a routine course applicable only to stonemasons and door-plate engravers.

If a man applies for the post of architect, or solicits the erection of a bridge, common prudence would dictate the propriety of examining his qualifications; but when an artist has already proved himself such on the walls of the principal Academy in London and elsewhere, it is absurd to compel him to go through a probationary and irksome course which does not properly represent his talent, and which, however well executed, he feels has been equally well done before, and best where there is little or no imagination to disturb the mechanical labours of the hand.

In every town, moreover, there are always plenty of illiterate ne'er-do-weels to be found who can go through

this Art course with ease and efficiency; who nevertheless could not copy a line from Nature correctly, that is, with Nature's *expression*, or invent a story on canvas. Why, then, estimate the poet—the true designer of Nature's making—by the mechanic of trade manufacture? Why shut out the struggling self-taught painter from all participation in the management of these schools? I might perhaps answer why; but I have said enough—not too much however for one who has been, and is still, a sufferer in common with others, by these academies, as well as through other enactments of a still more arbitrary nature.

I must only hope that these schools were called into play before their proper maturing, and that since they are daily adding to their original plan, (they have now life academies, and landscape masters for open-air instruction!) they will bear in mind that the true artist and designer is born, not made, and that when he does show himself among us, he must live, and should therefore have a little of that encouragement and protection which is so liberally bestowed upon aspiring clerks, draughtsmen, and artisans; particularly when the absurd prejudice that the *poet-painter* is unsuited to, or incapable of, filling routine employments, shuts him out necessarily from all participation in the common business of life, or from situations of trust, for which his *natural integrity and honour* so eminently fit him.

But these are not the only difficulties the artist has to contend with. He has the middleman, or dealer, ignorance and favouritism in the committees of local galleries, and no copyright, though he may demand any sum he likes for the right to engrave his work when successful; that is, when the subject happens to be popular.

Thus, the habit which people have of buying works from the dealer instead of from the artist, throws the profits of the latter's labour into the hands of the dealer, who is naturally interested in keeping down the struggling painter as long as he can, while at the same time he endeavours to enhance the value of his works under assumed names.

This he does through the difficulty of legally proving the identification of a work when once it leaves the artist's hands. So, selecting some well-known artist, whose works he can no longer obtain, and whose style resembles that of his victim, and then representing that the picture he seeks to dispose of is by the known painter, he rarely fails to succeed in getting what price the fashionable artist commands; thus damaging the reputation of the risen artist, when the work of the younger happens to be inferior or different, while he robs the other of that remuneration which should belong to him when the work is good, and he cheats the public into the bargain.

But after the many able and fearless *exposés* of such practices related in the 'Art Journal' and 'Illustrated News,' it is unnecessary for me to multiply examples of this usurious dealing, or to do more than speak of the evil; which, after all, mainly arises from the general ignorance of the actual value of a Work of Art in the public mind, and the tendency of most people to buy and patronize according to the fashion of the day.

Yet no one thinks of following the fashion in other commodities of a definite character; nor can dealers practise frauds in jewellery with impunity, simply because the public are too well acquainted with the real value of the latter. If the interests of Art were only as well cared for as those of trade, the artist might be able to survive the other obstacles which he is doomed to meet with in practical England. These difficulties however might be much lessened, or removed altogether, if our principal Universities or the Royal Academy would grant and publish diplomas to all exhibitors on its walls, founded on the natural acquirements, character, invention, and aim of the several candidates, giving precedence to poetry and truth over that sort of mechanical execution, which the Art Schools have made so general.

These diplomas would moreover do much to correct the very general feeling, that the works of rising artists

(not associates or R. A.'s) are of doubtful value, while they would place the young artist on the same footing as the barrister or physician, who, whether eminent or not, is still received as a qualified practitioner.

And also by requiring that the Board of Trade, or rather its servants, shall be confined wholly to geometrical Art with reference solely to manufactures, and give its borrowed instruction to those only who intend and certify to follow Art with that view. Or, if they will be permitted by our Royal Academy to carry out an interference with Art and the self-taught painter, which they dare not attempt with any of the recognized branches of trade, law, or medicine, artists who are British subjects have a right to demand some compensation for the injury to their prospects and resources which this wholesale competition has induced.

There are many ways by which this could be done which it would be out of place to speak of here; I only allude to what would be but fair and just, and justice is all that the artist can demand in these days from the people or the Government.

I have now, I trust, briefly but sufficiently explained the several properties of a perfect Work of Art, the object of Art, the mission of the artist, and his struggles here. I might have filled as many pages more with illustrations and remarks, but my object in writing

these Letters would be thereby defeated, which was to give you the greatest amount of information, and hints for connoisseurship, in the shortest possible space. For not only is Art long and life short, but the number of works that are hourly presented to us for perusal is so great, that anything like voluminousness (particularly on a subject which is usually thought to be not immediately connected with daily necessities) might be only irksome. I must also return to my easel.

Referring you, then, to the great school of Nature, from whose sources clear and pure I have gathered that which has enabled me to offer myself as your humble guide; and believing that it would be well for us all, in every capacity of life, if we took her oftener for our model, and, like the architect of the Eddystone light, listened to her pure but unobtrusive language, rather than to the dogmas of scholastic critics,

I remain, dear Reader,

Yours in all sincerity,

WILLIAM NOY WILKINS.

NOTES.

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NOTE A. (See page 8.)

In proof of the justness of my remarks respecting the class who have been chosen as Art instructors throughout the country, I beg to quote a communication from the 'Builder,' of January 26, 1856, wherein it appears that on the 23rd of the November preceding, the head master at Marlborough House felt it necessary to deliver the following words to his class:—

"I have hitherto endeavoured to govern you on high gentleman principles; but the ill-success attending my efforts obliges me to institute what is less honourable to yourselves—the factory system. Nor can you complain of this, as by your own conduct you have forfeited every claim to my consideration as gentlemen or men of honour."

"I leave it," says the writer of the above, "for others to decide what may be expected from an institution where artists are not gentlemen, and where men without honour may yet be entrusted with the entire government of our schools"!!

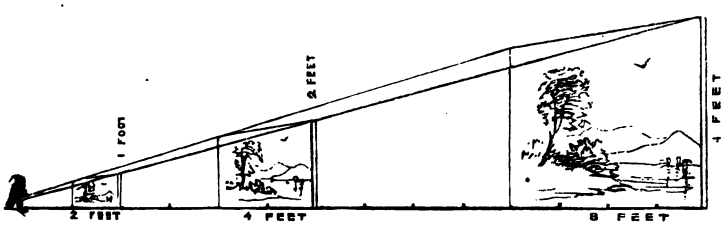
NOTE B. (See page 55.)

These remarks respecting the fugitive properties of water-colours, as compared with the same pigments in oil, apply only to those prepared in the ordinary manner—with mucilage on

the paper in common use. It is quite possible to execute them on other and more lasting material than paper, and with a medium that will not decompose.

The value of paper lies in its cheapness and readiness; qualities, however, which cease to be valuable when purchased at the cost of durability, and which, added to the well-known power of oil-colours for imitating Nature, are the sole reasons why our best painters have adopted the latter more difficult branch of Art manipulation.

NOTE C. (See page 81.)



The above woodcut illustrates the proper distance for seeing works of different dimensions,—namely, at or about twice the length of the picture. Some works, however, look best at the distance of thrice their length, while many, indeed most of Turner's large works, send the spectator back seven times the length of the respective pictures: it is only a master who can do this.